The Hour Strikes
Isaiah 40:1-5; 9-11
Matthew 3:1-17
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He came out of the desert, as had the people themselves, and as had their prophets time and time again in the past. He was a strange man; mad - some would have said: "a little touched" - which is one way men have always described an individual "touched" by the hand of God. He was strange, and yet compelling in a deep and irrational way. The people knew about the prophets: the prophets had been strange too. They had dressed, eaten, spoken and acted differently. But in their long history, the prophetic individual had played a major role in keeping the people in touch with the word and will of God.

So, in spite of misgivings and suspicion and fear they came out of the towns and cities to hear a man by the name of John the Baptizer. Like a prophet from centuries past he zeroed in on the facade of piety they used to disguise immorality. He told them to repent: turn around: start all over again. And as a sign and seal of this fresh beginning he invited them to join him in the Jordan River, in a ritual known as baptism. Thus, his name - John the Baptist. To Christian tradition John is important because he was a sign that something was about to happen. In the idiom of the Old Testament - he was one breaking new ground for a unique coming of God himself.

Of all the personalities presented in the pages of the Bible, John is one of the most interesting - and, in a sense, disturbing to our button-down mentality. Like the Jesus who came out to hear him, we find him at the same time compelling and repelling.

We know next to nothing about his origins. The New Testament tells us only that his mother, Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus: that his father was a priest: and that the conception of the child was a very surprising event because it happened when his parents were far beyond the ordinary, age for things like that to happen. We know, that is to say, that there was something special, something out of the ordinary, about his birth.

But no more than that.

There are, however, some very interesting and very educated guesses about his early life. And I would share with you the one which makes most sense to me. Around the year 200 B.C. a small group of deeply devoted and pious Jews, withdrew from society, organized themselves in a rigid community out in the desert and called themselves the Essenes. Archeological research has revealed much about these people. They shared everything they had and scratched out a living by rudimentary farming. They practiced absolute celibacy; private ownership was forbidden. They held to the religious law in the most rigid way possible. They saw themselves as the remnant of the faithful and cared little about the fate and welfare of the rest of the nation. Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the Essen community, however, was its obsession with cleanliness. Ritualistic bathing was practiced daily, before and after every meal, after every natural function, and in connection with the prescribed prayers, sacrifices, fast and religious rites. Much of the information we have about these people came from the spectacular archeological finds at Qune Rair, along the Dead Sea. That particular group wrote a great deal which has been discovered and translated - and much of it deals with their conviction that a messianic figure, a new prophet or teacher, was about to be sent by God.

The educated speculation, to which I referred, is that John's parents, quite old at his birth, died and left him an orphan at a very young age. And that the Essenes, as they did as a practice, adopted the boy and raised him to manhood in their community.

This would account for his coming from the desert: his uncompromising ethical demand: his strange dress and eating habits: his practice of ritualistic baptism and his sensitivity to the coming of the One promised by God. The best guess is that John, as a young man, began to disagree with the narrowness of the community's focus and way of life, and left it to address himself to the entire nation, bringing with him, however, much of the theological,

ethical content and the peculiar style of life.

His message was one of repentance, renewal and preparation for God's activity. In this sense it is not unlike the prophetic message of his predecessors. But John practiced Baptism, a rite common to many of the Eastern mystery religions, but within Judaism reserved soley for Gentile converts. A Jew, by birth, never in history had been baptized. A Gentile who wished to become a Jew, had to submit to circum cision sacrifice and baptism. So John, standing in the river and inviting Jews to repent and be baptized was, in effect, excommunicating the whole nation: he was saying that something so great, so important was about to happen, that nothing short of a total renewal experience was adequate as preparation. It did not, needless to say, win him friends from among the Pharises, Saduccess and Temple Priests.

The hour struck for John the Baptist, when Jesus of Nazareth appeared in the crowd one day along the banks of the river. John sensed that He was the one; said it and at Jesus request - baptized him. John maintained a following after that, was in correspondence with Jesus and his disciples - but was arrested and executed finally by the puppet king as a favor to a step-daughter.

The one who was baptized, Jesus of Nazareth, comes to the center of the stage with little more history than John. We know about his birth: we know about a trip to Jerusalem for the Passover when he was a boy and that is all. Again, educated speculation is that he grew up in a Jewish home in the town of Nazareth: that he was schooled in the Synagog: that he learned his father's trade: that he had brothers and sisters: that his father Joseph apparently died and according to custom, Jesus would have assumed responsibility for the care and support of the family.

The debate about when Jesus knew that he was the Messiah has raged for years, and often times, I think, reflects our discomfort with his manhood. A recent book suggests that he must have been married himself, and while there is no evidence for that, the suggestion does remind us of his humanity, his

commonality with all men. I've never been comfortable with the idea that he knew - from the beginning - who he was, and what he would do. I would rather think in terms of an unusually sensitive young man, with a growing conviction that he had something special to do: that God somehow had singled him out for a unique role. I sense him growing, waiting for something to happen, not knowing what it would be - or when - or how - but increasingly certain that at the right time - he would know.

William Barclay writies: "It may be said that there are two great beginnings in the life of every man who has left his mark upon history. There was the day when he was born into the world: and there is the day when he discovers why he was born into the world. There was a day in the life of Jesus when he made that great discovery." [p. 3 The Mind of Jesus, Harper & Row]

The experience in the Jordan River with John the Baptist was that day. He was baptized in a way that differed not at all from the others. I would suggest that those who saw it thought nothing other than "Jesus of Nazareth is joining us too." But for him - the hour struck. The text in Matthew notes that heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him, and a voice was heard saying "This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests." But in Mark - the earliest account - and Luke - the voice comes to Jesus - "You are my son": and the "feel" of the passage is that no one heard it - or sensed anything spectacular happening, but him.

I think Jesus came to this event in his life - open, waiting. I think he sensed in this experience, on a deeply personal level, that God was reaching into his life, touching him in a unique way. And it called forth in him a total commitment to follow wherever his Father led. It is helpful to remember that the leading was into the desert again for a period of lonely struggle and agony - and not, immediately into a Messianic ministry with the whole game plan in his pocket.

We have, up to this point, been learning a little New Testament history,

by reviewing very familiar material. Let us now go deeper - and think together about the issues raised by this event. It is really one issue - a very important one - a very immediate one for your life and mine. The name of the issue is "Revelation", and the question is "Does it really happen?" "Does God do it?" - or is it all the issue of the fertile imaginations of peculiar people?

The importance of the issue is documented by the number of books in which theologians have struggled with it. In semi-academic terms it is stated this way. Is the truth of the Christian Gospel born out intellectually - in the theological, philosophical brilliance of the human mind? Or are we dealing, in the final analysis, with something so totally subjective - so intensely personal - that its truth is validated in each heart and each set of emotions?

Scholars of equal capability line up on both sides. But the real problem is that Western man stopped paying much attention to the subjective - the feeling, emotion side of things several centuries ago. The scientific method, the rational approach to every problem dragged civilization out of the middle ages and gave birth to the machine age, modern science and the age of technology. And in things religious it said "if you can't prove it, it isn't true. if you can't weigh it, measure it, analyze it, place it in a certified category, and make a scientific law out of it, it doesn't exist."

Now, you and I wouln't say it quite that way, but we are very much the children of Western civilization. As Middle Class Americans, we are very much the ultimate result of the scientific method. The very rich consult the stars: the very poor consult their emotions and empty stomachs: we consult our computers. And the effect of it all is the word "revelation" has very little meaning to the vast majority of Middle Class American Protestants. Revelation after all, is not a very scientific idea.

It is, however, a very important theological idea. Our faith is built on the idea that Almighty God, in his eternity and power, does intrude into human history at certain times and places. Correspondent to that idea is that God does intrude into the lives of individual men and women: that he reveals

himself and his will through events that happen to people: that in this sense, he is a very personal God who breaks into our lives on a personal level. We are not saying that God always makes the events happen: that he structures every jot and tittle of our lives. We do affirm, that God does come through events which he choses to use for the purpose of revealing himself.

Listen to the words of a great pastor and theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr, who wrote a book on the subject. [The Meaning of Revelation.]

"When we speak of revelation we mean that something has happened to us in our history which conditions all our thinking and that through this happening we are enabled to apprehend what we are, what we are suffering, and what our potentialities are." (p. 138)

For Jesus, the Baptism experience was that kind of revelatory event. In it, he discovered who he was - what his life was about - and the direction he should go in the future.

Listen to H. Richard Niebuhr again: "Revelation means the moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end, in which we are apprehended by the knower; it means the self-disclosure of that eternal knower. Revelation means the moment in which we are surprised by the knowledge of someone there in the darkness and void of human life. . . When we find out that we are no longer thinking him, but that he first thought us, that is revelation . . . . What this means for us cannot be expressed in the impersonal ways of creeds or other propositions but only in responsive acts of a personal character. We acknowledge revelation by no third person proposition, such as that there is a God, but only in the direct confession of the heart, Those art my God." (p. 152-154)

My concern this morning is that we may be missing the moments of revelation in our own lives when they happen, because our eyes and ears are closed. Either because we have intellectualized that which is never totally intellectual, or because we are repelled by the claims of our Pentecostal brethren whenever

they sense their own brand of revelation, we simply are not alert to the self disclosure of God when it happens right in front of our faces.

The most incredible affirmation of Christian Faith, and that which distinguishes the Judeo-Christian tradition from all the religions of the world, is that it is God's nature to disclose himself to men. And that at given points in time and space he comes into the lives of individual men and women - into, that is, your life and my life.

The word of God in all of this, it seems to me, is for Christian people to tune in - to be alive to every event, to keep eyes and ears open to the revealing of God. And when it happens, as it will, to give thanks for it: to rejoice in it: to repent and commit oneself; and to begin anew that life in the new Kingdom which it heralds.

Amen.

Our father, awaken us to your continuing revelation. Keep us from the sterility of intellectualized religion: tune our hearts and minds and senses to the miracle of your presence in the common events of our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.